

Transcend From the Depths

Erik Simmons

We all have those moments, the ones that etch themselves into our brains. The experiences turn into memories that reverberate throughout one's soul. In my particular case, I can recall one unforgettable conversation with my cousin, a member of a rather prominent crime organization in Camden and very successful in these illegal endeavors. I remember asking him, with all his money, what more could he desire? On what basis did he still experience all this unhappiness? His words forever flow in my mind. My dearest cousin replied with wisdom, "I want people to acknowledge me. I want to matter. I want people to look at me like I'm a human being. I want to exist."

For this is the life of many isolated by poverty: feelings of inferiority and loneliness and a harsh standard of living—constantly hungry, scared, and subject to the whims of disease and Mother Nature. With such obstacles, finding the joy in life proves most difficult. According to the Census Bureau, in 2009, one in every eight adults and one in every five children went hungry (Jean).

I am the son of a split bloodline, half of which is derived from the rough streets of New York, while the other half hails from the quaint suburbs of Philadelphia. I've been more than blessed to experience what one would call both sides of society: the fortunate and the unfortunate, the sunshine and the shadows, the dream versus the nightmare. My immediate family has overcome the label of unfortunate and escaped the life of poverty, but I will never forget my roots, or my story. They have shaped my character and taught me what is vital to becoming someone who can make a difference. Poverty is an injustice that creates social inequalities and inequitable opportunities. Poverty is something insidious, a dark monster lurking

beneath the surface, pulling those who cannot fend for themselves into the abyss. As long as poverty exists, we are living in a flawed state of humanity in which ignorance persists and injustice lingers. Poverty must be eradicated forever. It's a hideous plague that hinders and inhibits the growth of mankind, halting many from reaching their true potential.

In my early childhood and all the way through my adolescent years, I spent a large amount of time in Camden, New Jersey, with my father's family. Those who know of Camden are cautioned vehemently to stay away. Camden is a city that has a crime rate 454.3% higher than the national crime rate and ranks as one of the poorest cities in the United States ("Camden Crime Rate Report"). This is what one would call the belly of the beast, but to me it was nothing more than another gigantic concrete jungle. I've experienced some of the most horrific crimes in this area that any one man could witness. A particularly striking instance involves my aforementioned cousin who has committed his fair share of unspeakable crimes. The summer before high school, I witnessed him beat a fellow teen practically to death because the boy had done something construed as disrespectful. I was frozen in terror not because of the aggressive encounter happening in front of me, but because of the sense of nonchalance with which it was taking place. Both the boy and my cousin appeared as if they had no choice in the matter. People continued on with their days, walking right by. There were no laws here, just chaos, and Charles Darwin's theory: survival of the fittest. In these moments, I could feel the souls of the people, swimming beneath the exterior in anguish under seemingly empty shells, abiding by the rules of the savage streets. To the people trapped inside, the way of life is a struggle for survival, always living in fear for one's life as areas such as these do produce and harbor true terrors. Many cry out for help; the silent cries of a people are drowned in the ignorance of a society.

This poverty is a despicable stain that never receives the attention it deserves. People are under the belief that poverty is something that exists in some far-off land and that America is a progressive nation that has long since eradicated such hideous things. In this land of the free and home of the brave, everyone has a fair chance, right? We could not be further from the truth, and this denial is costing us more than our integrity as we sit and observe, unmoved by those in pain. We are also wasting precious potential. In America, in 2010, 15.1% of the populace lived in poverty, the highest poverty rate since 1983 (Stanglin). Also, according to the Federal Reserve, the top one percent of households possess 34.6% of all private wealth (Domhoff). I am confident that I'm not the only individual who sees the problem here. The fortunate few revel in their wealth, contributing to the collective vice that is avarice. A high percentage of the wealthy allow poverty to go untreated, like a laceration with no stitching.

As I moved through Camden over my many summers and holidays, life was far from how things functioned in my home base back in Maryland. People on the Camden streets emanated such a cold feeling, and expressed looks brimming murderous intent. Being so young, I couldn't understand the hatred all of my brethren felt towards what they regarded as the outside world. I can recall vividly the encounters with the occasional traveler who would wander lost through the labyrinth asking for directions to the nearest exit. These people never regarded my friends and family with common courtesy. As I grew older, I began to grasp why all those stricken by poverty lived with such venomous hatred: It was the look in the eyes of those who descended from fortunate areas, a look that one would say told it all—the disgust, the indifference, and most of all the fear, as if we actually were caged animals. Color, religion, nationality—it didn't matter to those people. Their only wish was to escape the residents of this city and return to their lives of sunshine and flowers. This common scenario experienced by

many in Camden bred an “us against them” mentality that only further wounded the already damaged and distorted psyche of the people. The harder the times got, the more one could feel the pain stifling the air. The more the pain increased, the more the hatred grew, resulting in utter chaos.

This pain is almost unbearable for those who have experienced it. The demands of our culture elevate the levels of suffering of those in poverty to almost unbearable peaks, and not just physically. The mental torment of those in poverty is colossal. Having this background, I can personally attest that the worst part of being in this “have not” group is the isolation. Having everyone overlook you because they believe you are nobody. Your dignity is stripped from your soul one shred at a time, leaving this vulnerable core, easily malleable and open to influence. This is torturous and leaves a sense of emptiness, a hollowed pit in one’s mind that is almost impossible to fill. It is disturbing to see people go hungry, or see transients with no shelter, but what still gives me nightmares and flashes in the darkness of my mind’s eye is the demeanor of the children. Defeated and degraded, walking around like zombies, going through the motions as if there isn’t much to live for. It brings me great sorrow to recollect such things. They’re just kids, they don’t deserve this. Cries of rage reverberate through my inner thoughts, as I look disgusted upon society wondering: WHY WON’T YOU DO ANYTHING? But my question goes unanswered and this cycle of psychological destruction continues as children find themselves caught up in an inescapable reality. By destroying the social supports and heaving the mind into a chasm of torment, poverty sets the youth up to fail. Researchers have found that “poverty appears to inhibit families’ ability to achieve social control and, consequently, increases the likelihood of adolescent delinquency. These difficulties during childhood can translate into difficulties during adulthood” (Moore 5). Poverty has lasting adverse effects.

Poverty is currently a devastating cycle from conception until death with few escapees. It's a disease that one has the misfortune to be born with in most cases, or a handicap that one acquires through a series of events. The birthright is almost solely based on, for lack of a better term, the unluckiness of the individual. Once born into poverty, the goal is simple and finite: survive, and if the opportunity arises, escape. This life of torment and sorrow becomes a reality that only you and those around you can comprehend. Many just embrace the grind, accepting that there is no alternative. There is no reprieve, no relief; poverty is relentless and seemingly perpetual in the eyes of the less fortunate. I watch this beast swallow my family's community whole. It's a problem so big that none even attempt to battle it, instead often turning to barbaric means of survival and crime. My own clan succumbed, becoming entranced by nothing more than the dollar, blind to the chains that ensnare them all. I can see myself in the eyes of every cousin, every friend stuck and struggling in the figurative mud that is poverty. Their logic is arguably sound—crime makes sense for them, escape efforts seem futile—but sadly all of this only perpetuates the cycle that corrupts all who come in contact with it.

Poverty is a plague that needs a cure and more focus in the general public. One cannot fully appreciate the suffering without experiencing it. My personal experience has provided me with the insight to acknowledge this as an actual problem. These words do not belong to me—I am merely a mouthpiece for my brothers confined and imprisoned in the tattered buildings of the streets. This is my story, and I can only hope that no one ever has to tell it again as we charge into the future with higher aspirations, leaving poverty to the dustbins of history.

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